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Unchanging Racism in Chicago A Story Retold in Illinois Literature

by Shaylin Fuller

English 1102

Chicago has a rich history that has been encapsulated by much of Illinois' literature. The embodiment of the city has shifted and developed over time, ranging from its roots in the beautiful quiet prairie, to the completely contrasting machines of politics and skyscrapers one hundred times the height of the tall prairie grass. Although the city's past may seem contrasting, each stage of its life feeds into patterns; from determination for development to the horrors of prejudice. Prejudice towards red skin has shifted to black skin. The Prairie setting has grown into skyscrapers. Two stories represent a century of racism "The Indian Hater" by James Hall and "Looking for Mr. Green" by Saul Bellow. These two stories, one century apart, tell the truth that racism has not disappeared. When looking at the history of Chicago people tend to separate each stage, but instead should look at the underlying causes that lie in its history and literature.

Looking into individual stories of Illinois' literature does not tell us the whole story of issue or topics written about, but they do serve as pieces to a bigger puzzle of Illinois history. One story cannot be regarded as the complete truth, but should be used in tandem and balanced with several pieces of literature, documents, and other points of view. Literary devices like symbolism, personification, or exaggeration allow us to find patterns or draw similarity between different time periods. Analyzing in this way makes it clear that our history is riddled with similarity. James Hurt's 1992 book, *Writing Illinois*, came from his desire to understand Illinois as well as his fellow Illinoisans. He talks about the ways they describe the history of the state with, "a mixture of affection and embarrassment" (Hurt 2).

This compilation gives us insight into many of these important pieces of literature focused on the prairie, Lincoln, and Chicago. The book is organized by subject matter over sequence of events because Hurt saw these three topics as intertwined, that literature braided them together to create a certain culture, a "sort of world we have written for ourselves and the way we have written ourselves into it" (Hurt 3). Illinois' identity is rooted in the prairie, Lincoln is always depicted as a product of the prairie, and Chicago is seen as an extension of the prairie. One parallel he draws between the three is the idea of conjuring something out of nothing. The first white settlers wrote accounts of standing looking as vast nothingness, doubting its ability to support civilization. Biographies written about Lincoln wondered how such a great man could rise from a "stagnant, putrid, pool" like Illinois (Edmunds 41). And finally, a character in Saul Bellow's 1975 book *Humboldt's Gift* says, "I was trained in Chicago to make something out of nothing. In Chicago you become a connoisseur of the near-nothing" (Bellow, 23). This character is an echo of 100 years of describing Chicago as a sort of miracle that rose from nothing.

Hurt's observations of the parallels between these three subjects in literature is an example of using literature to find patterns in history. Hurt asks, how could it be something and everything all at once, through its whole history? Well, the answer is because the people observing and writing about it were simply seeing something new and unfamiliar. It's flat landscape was far different from the varied European landscape with hills, trees, and streams. Likewise, Lincoln's frontier background was not one of leadership that could be recognized by people criticizing him. The confusion of what Chicago was through its history is responsible for the way Hurt says people of Illinois currently talk about the state, with both affection and embarrassment.

A conclusion like this about Chicago's current state takes analysis of multiple sources. These must be taken throughout the state's entire history, using specific factors (like the prairie, Lincoln, and Chicago) as an anchor from which to make comparisons. In reference to the problem of racism, the anchor could be the setting that moves from desolate prairie to concrete jungle; and skin color that moves from red skin, to black skin. The complexities and distrust of racists are what remains unchanged. President Abraham Lincoln encapsulated this lack of change best when he said, "Fellow citizens, we cannot escape history" (1862 Address to Congress).

In order to clarify the representation of racism in Illinois' literature, a definition of racism must be established. In Chicago's literature, it presents itself as a racial hierarchy where one is better than the other. The result is a set of prejudiced emotions; of seeing people as "the other." The definition of racism, though, should only be a starting point from which to begin learning. Like with any topic, many accounts should be taken into consideration with this topic including emotional primary sources, and more analytical and historical secondary sources. In order to understand each of the stories, historical background should be considered, starting with "The Indian Hater."

In the 1840's, Americans decided that the West, which they had assigned to the Indians, now needed to be subject to their civilization. The previous notion of moving them out of the way was no longer an option, for anywhere they thought to move them would put them in the way of Americans and their race to innovation. They were now a problem to be dealt and the solution was that they became "civilized" or died. The eventual resolution was the reservation system where each tribe was assigned a clearly defined zone. Roy Harvey Pearce referred to these in his 1953 book *Savagism and Civilization: A Study of the Indian and the American Mind*, as, "savage islands in the midst of civilized seas" (Pearce 239). The choice of the word savage is riddled with irony because Pearce is a secondary source, writing about the past with a bias that suggests Americans were in the wrong. Without saying it, he is setting a tone of racism that shows Americans viewed their way of life as superior and that it should be uniformly practiced among all people. These segregated plots were put into place with the hope that once the Native Americans were on their own, they would have the sense to become civilized. Which of course, failed as it had many times before. The resulting atmosphere was dishonor from the Americans, distress from the Natives, and violence on both sides.

A representation of the resulting racism in literature can be found in a collection of short stories called "*The Indian Hater*" and *Other Stories* by James Hall. In the story, *The Indian Hater*, the subject of the racism is the Native Americans and the setting is the prairie. The story is about a backwoodsman who is thought to murder Indians with his rifle because his "kin has been murdered by the savages in early times" (Hall 142).

Analyzing the literature as a part of the historical whole allows the reader to see the emotional side of the story and places the reader in the shoes of whichever character he or she decides to identify with. In this story it could be the bystander who is narrating the story. Or it could be the immediate hostility from the backwoodsman. Or maybe the resulting fear the Indians express, as if they'd practiced it before. No matter which the reader embodies, a different level of understanding is added to the history. At the same time, the contrast between "us" and "them" in the story and hatred rooted in the past is a pattern that can be drawn upon when analyzing similar literature all throughout history. The racism in this story is perpetuated mostly by Christian hypocrisy. The backwoodsman explains his passion for getting revenge toward those who killed his family, saying, "when peace came, I continued to make war. I made it a rule to kill every red skin that came in my way" (Hall, 12). His vengeance is not toward the individuals, but the whole race. His deep hatred is almost ironic when he says, "I could not quench my thirst for the blood of those monsters" (Hall, 12). His description of himself as bloodthirsty is a barbaric quality of a savage or "monster". His separation of himself from the those who murdered his family is hypocritical in itself. But, the backwoodsman's hypocrisy runs deeper. He justifies murder and violence because it is only unto Indians that he casts it. He says to the narrator of the story, "I shall not hurt a hair of your

head...I never harmed a christian man” (Hall, 11). His claims suggest that he thinks he is a good christian even though he’s killed innocent Indians, beyond those who killed his family. In one of the most well known verses of the New Testament Jesus tells his followers not to indulge in evil and revenge but instead, “If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well” (Matthew 5:38-40). The backwoodsman has had his “shirt” stolen from him and instead of handing over his coat, he takes the coat off the back of every man that resembles he who stole his shirt.

The style of the end of the story sounds almost biblical as the backwoodsman urges the narrator to go, and leave him on his way and to try to condemn him if he ever loses all of his loved ones (Hall, 12). This style effectively provokes the reader to make a biblical connection and notice the theme of hypocrisy. The emotions of feeling the need to defend “the other” against the hypocrite make the reader realize the injustice of hatred of an entire race and the killing innocent individuals without having to say it outright. These emotions can be felt no matter the subject or the setting.

A century later, Chicago has modernized and industrialized but the deep rooted divide can still be recognized in literature. Red skin is now black, and the tall prairie grass is now giant skyscrapers.

Violent crime is a huge problem in many of Chicago’s neighborhoods. Today, homicide rates in Chicago are blamed for a spike in the rates of the entire nation (Wheeling 1). Shooting sprees and other violent incidents constantly flood the news. This isn't the case in all Chicago neighborhoods; the predominantly white neighborhoods have actually improved. The violence in black neighborhoods is due to a history of policies that leave people in these neighborhoods deprived of resources like good health care, jobs, and schooling, similar to conditions in Native reservations.

Many factors are to blame, including housing like The Projects—rows of housing that stack poor people on top of each other. These housing projects can be compared to the reservations that the Natives were set aside on. That is because they are both based on the same prejudice ideal that one race is less civilized and needs to be contained elsewhere. Another problem often talked about is Chicago Public Schools; 60 years after Brown vs. Board of Education, segregation in schools is still clearly present. Budget cuts and layoffs result in lack of opportunity for low income students that don’t have the choice of private schooling.

Analysis of literature on the topic of Chicago’s racism brings the reader into the emotional identification with black characters, similar to prejudice toward Natives in “*The Indian Hater*” . Saul Bellow’s 1968 story “Looking for Mr. Green” lets the reader in to the emotional world of prejudice in Chicago during hard economic times. It also allows the reader to draw chilling parallels between both pieces of literature and realize this is an unchanging problem.

Just like Hall, Bellow uses irony to move his story along, making the journey all about a white man not able to find the man who desperately needs this government relief check. The divide can be seen when Grebe, the white man delivering the check, is questioning colored people that work with Mr. Green. Their replies are distrustful because Grebe is seen “as an emissary from hostile appearances” (Bellow 23). A probable cause for their distrust was the recent 1919 race riot, only years before the story, which is set in an economically depressed 1930’s Chicago. Bellow’s approach is the opposite from Hall’s, putting the white man into the presence of “the other”, instead of having “the other” walk in to fear of the white man. In both stories, an atmosphere of distrust, even hatred, is created along a divide that is deep-seeded. The story uses a lot of symbolic representation through the characters of a system that confuses Grebe, as he wonders why we are accepting of paying for the terrible way things are, giving the El as an example of this success. The notion of making something from nothing is seen again when Grebe contemplates the amount of times Chicago has been rebuilt.

In many cases, the underlying importance of money and the need to “make something out of nothing” is the cause of distrust and prejudice. Pearce describes this correlation of prejudice toward the Natives. He mentions that, to a westerner like Senator Thomas Hart Benton, the Natives failure

was a success. This is because “his eye was always on the bigger and better and richer life that was to rise when the West was civilized” (Pearce 239). The result of the importance of wealth is economic competition that creates a divide. In a speech Benton made to his colleges about the inferiority of the Indians, he talks about how the “red men” are in the way of commerce that needs to happen with the Orientals (yellow men). Benton articulates that the white race is superior, and “the other” is simply an obstacle and a problem to be dealt with. As a result, “it would seem,” he said, “that the white race alone received the divine command, to subdue and replenish the earth!” (Pearce 239). This is again the notion that something is to be made of nothing. The view that there is something to be fixed here, and that what is currently there (the Indians), is no good. The result of this outlook is a city still riddled with racial conflict.

Today, one in seven Illinois residents is an immigrant. Also, one in six Illinois workers is an immigrant, making up a huge part of the workforce among a range of industries from health care to construction. Among other benefits of Illinois Immigrants is billions of dollars in tax contributions and tens of billions in consumption dollars toward Illinois’ economy (American Immigration Council). Despite known benefits, President Donald Trump is committed to develop policies not in their favor, like border security. Policy about a wall is eerily familiar to the past.[-p (projects, reservation, moving the problem elsewhere, the problem being “the other” “Their dream is now a nightmare.”

Literature can provide a reader with much more information than history books alone. When the two are paired together, history looks less like a timeline and more like a variation of stories, all separated into topics. Each story repeats itself, with the same cause and effect pattern found one hundred years before—only the character and setting change. In the case of Chicago, racism is one of these topics and the stories are repeated through and through its past. The authors of these stories suggest that viewing events in history is naive. In order to analyze an event, we must look at the whole picture, using literature as a tool.

Works Cited

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This is a secondary source because it is fiction. I used the story to represent the manifestation of racism in more recent times.

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I chose this source to get reliable quotes. The description of the book is an extremely rare source that show that American people have not been told the truth about the “Civil-war”. It is a secondary source but I used it as a primary source, because it uses quotes from Northerners that were primary sources.

Hall, James. *"The Indian Hater" and Other Stories*. 1828.

This is a secondary source because it is fiction. I used this story to analyze the manifestation of racism in earlier times.

Hurt, James. *Writing Illinois*. Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois, 1992.

This is a secondary source. I used this book to get the idea that everything in Illinois history is related to the Prairie, Lincoln, and Chicago. I also used it to get the idea that subject matter is a good way to organize things rather than chronology because history repeats itself.

"Immigrants in Illinois." *American Immigration Council*, 9 May 2018. Pearce, Roy Harvey. *Savagism and Civilization: A Study of the Indian and the American Mind*. 1953.

This is a secondary source with a lot of good analysis and history on the time period of the story "The Indian Hater" that I did not know.